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Experts say scores mask education deficiencies

Education leaders say closer look at statistics shows students lagging national average

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Associated Press

BOISE -- Test results showing Idaho students exceeding national average scores in reading and mathematics are masking comparative weaknesses in the state's education system, experts said.

"You have to look deep within the data before you can start seeing what the real story is," State Schools Superintendent Marilyn Howard said in an interview with The Associated Press.

Idaho ranked among the bottom eight states in spending per pupil in 2001, the latest year for which figures are available.

Joyce Garrett, Boise State University's education dean, said an in-depth look at Idaho's results shows "you get what you pay for.

"You give me the same amount of money that they're spending every day to fight war in Iraq, and I'll show you a completely different school system," Garrett said.

Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, known as the nation's report card, were released last week. They showed Idaho fourth- and eighth-grade students scored slightly above the national average in math and reading scores.

But more direct comparisons indicate Idaho's overwhelmingly white student population is lagging behind much of the nation, especially in math.

A generally no-frills education system, relatively low incomes in rural Idaho and a comparatively low percentage of college-educated parents are the reasons some educators believe Idaho students are not keeping pace nationally despite average test scores.

"We're not challenging our best students," Howard said. "We have a lot of rural districts and offering challenging courses can be difficult for them. We're also a state where we're still seeing first-generation kids go on to college.

"Having that as a family expectation seems to raise the bar," she said. "It doesn't have anything to do with intelligence. It's a matter of awareness."

Garrett also said that the poverty level in rural Idaho creates some of the same learning problems among the almost exclusively white students that are common to inner-city children who are more likely minorities.

"Poverty issues, unemployment issues, health issues all mirror urban problems," she said. "You have to meet psychological, emotional and physical needs before they can fully learn."

State officials point out that the proficient scoring level on the Idaho Standards Achievement Test, the state's 10th-grade-based high-school exit exam beginning in 2006, is the equivalent of just the basic performance level on the national test.

Almost 30 percent of Idaho high school sophomores flunked the state test this spring.

"We give lip service, at least, to the idea that students need to be thinkers, they need to know how to problem-solve," Garrett said. "And then we test them on whether they know the route that Lewis and Clark took to get across the United States.

"It's a key piece of the rest of it, but it's not the piece that will make the difference," she said. "Where's the critical thinking, where's the evaluation?"

Howard speculated that there will be pressure for improvement once the debate about high school exit exams and their composition slides into the background.

"Then certainly every parent, or the 75 percent or so of the parents whose kids pass this minimum achievement test the first time, are going to want to know, 'What's school doing for my kid?'" she said.

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